

03/13/2016 -- Lent 5C

“Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Our journey to the Cross and beyond brings us deeper into the world this week. There is a significant difference now, though. After the awakening that arrives in the Transfiguration that there are shadows in us and in the world, and once we begin to confront those shadows with Jesus in the desert, we begin to understand that our knowledge of right and wrong, good and evil is distorted. There we can only rely on God’s promises to us, all the way back to Abraham. We begin to adopt a world-view that takes its cues from the eternal rather than the worldly now because we are committed to an eternal and loving God. Even though we and others might try to hold us to the past and what we have done, we, like the Prodigal Son, are welcomed into the family of God without any judgment or recognition that we are defined by that past. We are defined by the eternal, loving God who sees us from an eternal perspective. And so we begin to see others the same way.

This is the deepening of faith and life that Jesus calls us to on the road to the Cross. As our faith reaches more deeply into God and the Holy Spirit seeks out more from our depths, we are now drawn more deeply into the world, into the daily actions and decisions that make up our lives. We become God-oriented participants in God’s creation, in the material of this world. Our hands get dirty. We feel things. Sometimes, it hurts. The Creation responds to us and we respond back. God works with and through us.

Our reading from Isaiah puts it this way:

*Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
20The wild beasts will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.*

(Isaiah 43:19-21)

The visceral, sensuous participation in God’s creation is meant for God’s praise. The same visceral sensuality is present in the house of Martha and Mary and Lazarus as well. Here, there is a dinner prepared. Friends are present. It is a loving family and a close intimate scene, made all the more so by the smell of expensive perfume, which is being wiped on the feet of Jesus by Mary, who is using her long hair to do it. It sounds luxurious, doesn’t it? Almost heavenly.

I believe that, in the other-world, the next life, that we become more human. Everything that you believe to be best about being human will be accentuated and will be more present

there. Our eternal life with God and Christ is like a magnifying glass on whatever is good and true and beautiful here. And one of the things that gets accentuated in that next life is our ability to choose, our free will, if you wish. The thing about choosing things in the presence of God and Christ, though, is that we will not be choosing between good and bad things, between right and wrong things - we will be choosing between beautiful and true things, between good and good things.

See, at this point in our journey to the Cross, we have come to a point where we have some trust and assurance about the promises God has made and the presence of Christ with us in our lives. Like the Prodigal Son last week, God has changed the future we thought we deserved to the one he has created for us. This is the place, the mindset, Mary is in. It fills her with praise, compassion and the desire to express her love by anointing Jesus with something of great value. Imagine a whole church filled with people at this point on their spiritual journey - people whose sole desire is to praise, anoint, and express their love for God and for others.

This is not the road Judah is walking. He has missed an important moment in his journey with the Lord. I am not sure where that happened exactly, but Judas is still living in a divided, dualistic world where there are right things to do and wrong things to do, where he still feels like he is able to discern and decide who is worthy of money and attention and who is not. Judas has chosen not to make the journey or commitment to a God-oriented worldview.

The reason we know this to be true is because, for Judas, Mary has chosen a wrong thing - using expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet, and she could have chosen a right thing - sold the perfume and served the poor with the money she would have received.

From Jesus' perspective, though, Mary has chosen between two right things. Mary has distilled her life, her perspective, her faith, to Jesus alone. And so Jesus reprimands Judas. We read this verse about the poor always being with us as if we are faced with a choice between one or the other, that there is a right and wrong choice here. But imagine if Mary had in fact sold the perfume and did go out and serve the poor with the money. What would Jesus have said then? I am not sure, but what I am sure of is that both things, both actions - anointing the feet of Jesus and serving the impoverished - are good and right and true. Mary is choosing between two right things, and today, at the house, she chose to praise and anoint Jesus.

This is what it is like to come into the world knowing everything we have learned up to this point. The eternal point of view, when it is fully engaged and welcomed, leads us to decisions between two right things. When I was in chaplaincy training at Abbott-Northwestern Hospital, I began to realize my sense of my calling was changing. I entered seminary thinking I would become a chaplain in some context. When I began to wonder if maybe I was called to church ministry instead, I was thinking of the decision as between right and wrong, good and bad. But then I was reading Scripture - it may have been this very story, I don't remember - and I was struck by how the Lord sometimes gives us two equally weighted things to choose from. The issue at that moment for me was not 'making the right choice'. The issue was actually God presenting me with the opportunity to exercise my God-given free will in the world, to simply choose.

The question for Mary at the dinner that day was not “*Is this the right thing to do?*” The question for Mary was “*How can I best serve Christ?*” This is important: Once we are at this point on the path to the Cross, once we have chosen the journey of transformation with Jesus, there is no wrong answer to that question. There are only greater or lesser answers to it. Some things serve Christ more; some things not as much - but everything points toward Christ in terms of the decisions being made. Judas doesn’t see this. Judas does not see with the eyes of Mary; Judas does not know what Mary knows.

Think of the decision Mary makes to do this today in the context of how an athlete trains. That is the language Paul uses in Philippians.

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 3:13-14)

Paul knows he is not perfect. He knows that he does things that are not in alignment with God and Christ, but what Paul is telling the Philippians - a town that well understood training images because Philippi was the retirement town for veterans of the Roman army - is that all his thoughts and decisions and actions, to the very best of his ability come from attempting to answer ‘*the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*’.

When I was a kid, my favorite sporting event to watch was the Winter Olympics. I was very young when Franz Klammer, from Austria, began winning the World Cup in downhill racing. Klammer was a full-spectrum skier, excelling at many styles of downhill racing. He trained hard with the best skiers in the world at the time. I decided to look up training regimens for downhill racing, and Dave and Karen could speak to this much better than I can, but the US Ski Association has a ‘training matrix’ for downhill racers. It starts when the skier is very young and moves into competition training at around 14-16 years of age. If someone is serious about competing at the highest levels, the expectation is skiing pretty much every day and working out at least 5 times a week. In other words, every decision a competitive downhill skier makes is related to downhill ski racing and pressing onward toward the prize, forgetting all the falls and mistakes in the past and straining forward to what lies ahead.

My other favorite sport to watch and participate in is tennis. For many years, and even recently, Roger Federer was the world’s best player. He won consistently on every kind of court. His coach said, “*Yes, he has natural talent. But natural talent only lets you play well. Practice and training is what lets you win consistently.*” For Roger Federer, every decision he makes is in the service of the game. Likewise for the phenomenal Serena Williams.

There are always anomalies, though. Bill Johnson was a crazy, beer-drinking, cigarette-smoking phenomenon who hated to work out and never listened to coaches. When he pointed his skis down the hill, though, whatever he did won races, including Olympic medals. But he skied a whole lot and learned quickly.

Likewise, John McEnroe is probably the most talented tennis player in history. At the height of his game, he bragged, as he often did about himself, that he never worked out. But he played a whole lot of tennis. John McEnroe works out now, though. He started working out

when he realized he would never be able to keep up the game unless he did. Now he can still compete with the best in the world in demonstration matches. The point is that, even with phenomenons like Bill Johnson and John McEnroe, their decisions, at the height of their game were always oriented toward the game. McEnroe's question was always, "*How will this best serve the game I want to play?*", not "*Should I play tennis or not?*" Some choices served the game better and some not as well, but all the actions and decisions were toward the betterment of the game he was playing.

A lot happens in the spiritual life. I love to talk about heady, spiritual things and that is a good and true and beautiful thing to do. At this stage in the journey to the Cross, though, we are in the world. We are being called to make decisions in a world where car accidents happen, where people get sick, where death marches on, where politicians say crazy stuff and people are suffering because of decisions by governments and economies. For those of us who have committed ourselves to the Way of Christ, we are given an example in Mary of how we increase our connection to God in our daily decisions and daily work. At this point in the journey to the Cross, we are not asking "*Is this right or wrong, good or evil?*" That was way back in the desert. Now, like Mary anointing the feet of Jesus, the decisions we make and the actions we take are in answer to the question, "*How can I best serve Jesus Christ right now?*" Amen.